

GENDER SPECTRUM NEUTRALITY  
AND THE EFFECT OF GENDER DICHOTOMY  
WITHIN VIDEO GAME DESIGN AS CONCEPTUALIZED IN:  
THE FOUNDATIONS OF *SONG BIRD*

A CREATIVE PROJECT  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE  
MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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MUNCIE, INDIANA

DECEMBER 2018

**ABSTRACT**

*Song Bird* is an original creative project proposed and designed by Caleb Noffsinger at Ball State University for the fulfillment of a master's degree in Telecommunication: Digital Storytelling. The world that will be established is a high fantasy world in which humans have risen to a point that they don't need the protection of their deities and seek to hunt them down as their ultimate test of skill. This thesis focuses more so on the design of the primary character, Val, and the concept of gender neutrality as portrayed by video game culture. This paper will also showcase world building, character designs for the supporting cast, and examples of character models as examples. The hope is to use this as a framework for continued progress and as an example of how the video game industry can further include previously alienated communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Song Bird* was created with an initial hope of furthering inclusion into the video game communities, a community that prides itself in its vast fan bases of people from all walks of life and ideals. Even with this, there is unexplainable backlash to new video games that star characters that breach traditional and established ideals. Video games such as *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017) do extremely well in the critic reviews and make great strides toward equal representation of gender in video games, yet the backlash to it was incredible. Other things like the reboot of the *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) series with a far less feminine and overly exaggerated characteristics carried some outcry from the loyal fanbase that it did not “fit the form”, even if the form was overly sexualized. People who wanted all their characters to be grizzled old white men didn’t even pick up the game because being forced to play as a strong female protagonist was just social justice warriors trying to cram their agenda down their throats again. It is puzzling simply because people were willing to pass on one of the best games of the year rated 89 out of 100 (Metacritics, 2015), given high marks by most official reviewers and users alike) simply because of the fact the main character was female. Then, during a conversation with some friends about Transgender in video games, the idea arose of a truly gender-neutral protagonist for both men and women across the spectrum to relate to. Nass et al. found that people feel more attraction and trust with a computer character that has the same ethnic background as the user than with one that has different ethnic background (2000). Video games share the same effect as movies and literature, that by having someone who can connect to the audience, the audience will in turn better relate to the movie and view it in a more positive light. Nass et al. found that people feel more attraction and trust with a computer character that

has the same ethnic background as the user than with one that has different ethnic background (2000).

The game itself will be modeled after a more linear storytelling style, straying from the hot bed of “open world” titles that have been produced en masse over the past few years. The game will follow the primary character, Val (Figure.1), as they are left to die after a great battle, discovers a secret about the deities, and then the rejection of their truth by their own people and not having a place to turn to. The game play will be a 3D, exploration-based game, but lending difficulty from *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011) or *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005), challenging the player to approach each confrontation a different way and to execute the puzzle with



*Figure 1 Val*

precise mastery of the controls. There will be limited filler or “Side Quests” throughout the story, attempting to focus more on the primary characters and supporting characters, building the world and drawing in the audience. In all, the game would likely only be a five to ten-hour experience, depending on how the player could adjust to the controls and learn the flow of combat. There would be no leveling or skill trees and very little character customization, all to draw all peoples into a similar experience and not alienating anyone based on what base character models are available and making the experience as fluid and logical as possible.

The end goal of this project is to have a fully fleshed out world, one you could see being made into a full video game with characters that people can latch onto and relate with, all while being aware of the overarching theme the piece portrays. Characters and world design will be clearly laid out along with a script and beat sheet of the introductory scene. Character models

will be created, two to show what the video game world sees as “the basic genders” of male and female, along with the addition of my main character, Val, who will be built with the ideas of gender neutrality in mind. The first level will be completed in a minimal capacity due to resource constraints but will show the flow of the game and the overarching aesthetic.

The story will be a typical three-part arc, ending with Val, the hero, barely managing to save the last deity, and restore some balance to the world. Yet while story is clearly important, the character development will be the focus, building from the world, and feeling natural in the narrative. The players should see Val grow and struggle to find footing with the knowledge that by destroying the deities, a greater evil will follow, one humanity cannot face. It should feel like the Non-Player Characters (NPC) are tenacious and not open to the new idea that what they are doing is wrong and could have catastrophic consequences. People should look at this story and feel some parallel to real life, where knowledge can sometimes be ignored, carrying with it catastrophe and irreversible effects. It is because of this theme that the character must resonate with as many people as possible. The plan is for the players to feel like they are the one running about with clear knowledge of impending doom while the rest of the world tries to fight back against them. There will be no indication of player gender or who Val really is in hopes to pull in as many people as possible, but not alienate certain people simply because of their perceived agenda along with who they relate with.

Further details will elaborate on all these ideals, focusing on why the main character must be gender neutral for the piece to work. The literature will focus on gender neutrality and the effects of a gender dichotomous industry and its effects on people of who maybe do not see themselves on a toggle switch of male or female. It will also look at preexisting games that

feature “gender neutral” characters, or that make strides toward making a more open and affirming environment for peoples of all kinds and how they were successful, or not.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

While there has not been a lot on the conversation of gender neutrality in video games and gaming communities there is plenty about gender in general within these circles. While statistics show that the male/female ratio of gamers is about 59% male, 41% female (Statista, 2018), people in U.S. have treated the platform like it is entirely male driven. It has gotten so bad, that during the Overwatch league, one of the first major E-Sports events of its genre which, took place early 2018, none of the professional players among the hundreds present were female. It wasn't until early February that a woman was hired onto a team, and even then, it was only one. The player chosen was one named, Geguri, a Korean born gamer who, at the time of the games release, had been accused by a professional gamer about using aim assist software, an artificial way to appear skilled in a game. It wasn't until she appeared live, with another individual that it was discovered that she was that good at the game. The world still thinks that video games are a predominately masculine thing and treat it as such, objectifying women and putting hyper masculine characters as the protagonist. It is true that for a long while, the disparity between male and female protagonists and the roles each gender played was horrible and skewed as proven by many studies such as Yi Mou and Wei Peng's study done in 2009 titled *Gender and Racial Stereotypes in Popular Video Games*. Their findings proved that. at the time, there significantly more males in leading roles, and women seen as more of a helping role (Mou and Peng, 2009). This has led to a mindset that horribly alienates not only women, but also those that do not feel as though they land on the typical spectrum of "male" or "female".



While many games, such as Guerilla Games *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017) feature a strong female protagonist, there is a backlash from the more vocal masculine members in the video game community (a minority but a very loud and vindictive minority) about Social Justice Warriors (SJW) trying to influence them with their agenda, skipping great games with fantastic messages just because they can't deal with playing a strong female. One of the answers could be a gender-neutral character. Not all games should follow this, quite the opposite. *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) (fig. 2) would be a very different game if the protagonist was male, along with games such as *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt Red, 2015) (fig 3) both of which deal with many issues of their respective genders and how the world views people in their position. But the idea of a gender-neutral character, while it seems like it is any easy thing, is quite difficult to achieve. Many games get so close, but due to the classification and programing restraints, still fall short.

*Figure 2 Lara Croft**Figure 3 Geralt of Rivia*

With the LGBTQ community becoming more and more prevalent and accepted in society, the way we play video games and who we make games for will need to shift as well. After the events of an event coined “GamerGate”, many women and LGBTQ people felt alienated from the gaming community. GamerGate happened when a falling out between two a journalist and a video game designer, leading to bad reviews for a game, and some intense backlash. The event left a bad taste in the mouth of gamers about females in the gaming industry. It has been a slow rocky climb from that time, but in its wake, many groups have made strides toward a more even and fair playing field. Pozo, Ruberg, and Goetz (2017) talked about the establishment of archives and community conventions based around the inclusion of people of all kinds into the world of video games, and how especially in the AAA title scene, the big buck

studios that pump out game after game, there is a severe lack of mutual inclusion of people of all kinds. While some games such as *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007) or *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) have added options for homosexual players in terms of romance and lifestyle options (Fig. 4), there are still strides to be made simply because they are kind of shoed under the rug and made somewhat irrelevant by the countless other actions the player can take in those games. They also still lack the capability to blur the lines between male and female, forcing people who are not sure where they fall on the spectrum to be left out in the dust.



Figure 4 *Mass Effect* Player Character romancing a same sex team member.

While there is a backlash against media that might “make a statement” it is clear, after movies such as *Black Panther* (Marvel, 2018), that simply by including people of a wide variety, change can be made. It goes without saying that culture and ideas are affected by the media. There are plenty of examples of movies, books, television shows, news channels, radio, and video games impacting the way people perceive ideologies and other cultures. Yet when it comes to video games, there are few large-scale games that really make an impact. There are indie games, small, low budget experiences that lead the way when it comes to these topics, but few AAA titles. Jung laid out the archetypes of the hero and the other characters inhabiting the story, along with the roles each individual person plays. These archetypes, he asserted, could fit to almost all works of fiction and even in historical storytelling (Jung, 1939). He wrote all about the Hero’s Journey and who plays what part in their story, but as Sharon R. Sherman, a film professor at the University of Oregon, in her article of *Perils of the Princess: Gender and Genre in Video Games* points out, the heroes still tend to be predominately male. The large ongoing Intellectual Properties (I.P.) have foundations in the belief that most gamers are masculine, and

that there is a predictable correlation between an increase of masculine characters and an increased alienation of women and members of alternative lifestyles (Sherman, 1997).

Yet the narrative does not need to suffer, or the theme and ideals carried in a piece change simply because the design decision of gender landed on a certain one. There is a joke in the gaming community about how every serious game out there is headed by some serious grizzled white dude with short brown, slightly greying, hair with an unkempt beard. It has gotten to the point that that character archetype is almost expected in modern First-Person Shooters (FPS) such as *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003) and *Battlefield* (EA Dice, 2002). It is the safe option, but it is the most over used character in all of gaming. With this shoehorning of the protagonist into this archetype, many people feel excluded and cannot relate, losing what the game is about and falling on deaf ears or forgotten altogether.

There are a few pieces to look at when it comes to analyzing a good story, that I have been picking apart and analyzing all my time as a gamer. Ludology, or the study of video games mechanics acting as a part of the story, is important to focus upon. One of the reasons video games are so compelling is because of their interactive nature. There is so much you can do with them that sets their stories apart from movies and television. Games such as *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2002), whose entire story is told through the gameplay, and the gameplay defines the character and how the player interacts with the world, is one way a video game can stand out. The games listed above scored very high on digital review sites, 92 as its average across review compilation sites, both being praised for their creative take on narrative and fluid gameplay (Metacritics, 2015). Flow, as defined by Jenova Chen building from Csikszentmihalyi's theory (Chen, 2007) of the same name and the creator of *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012) and other high concept, gameplay driven games, is very important in

how the audience experiences the game, flowing between boredom and anxiety when it comes to challenge and abilities. These games, while a challenge, follow this logic, never alienating the player in what they are striving toward. There are moments of pure calm and also tense, terrifying moments. Journey as example, traversing the great oceanlike halls with all these colorful and helpful ribbons coursing around you feels very different to walking atop the mountain, nearly freezing to death, slowing down to a near crawl as you move from one fire to another. The game follows this distinctive rise and fall, becoming more obvious and having a higher payoff every time.

World building is important as well when it comes to video games. There are many games out there that seem like they could have strong, compelling stories, but the world is so barren and under developed. There are also games, like *Destiny* (Bungie, 2014), that have fully flushed out worlds with gorgeously written prose, but then the in-game story is almost non-existent. The world really should feel like a livable place, with histories and legends to pull the player in, and allow those deep divers of players to dig through the lore and learn something new about the game. The lore really is where the narrative shines and lays the ground work for what the story can do. Now, it is not to say that all the attention should be put into world building, and the actual narrative and in game story should be ignored. The aforementioned video game *Destiny* suffered greatly from this. It is genuinely fun to go into those books of background information and world building and learn all about how humanity developed, flourished, and eventually crashed. Without world building, the player would have no context as to why we are going through the motions. There is no U.S.S. Enterprise in *Star Trek* (Roddenberry, 1966) without explaining FTL (Faster Than Light) technology and the utopia that is earth, nor the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) without Morgoth first betraying the Valar. Even

works of non-fiction need to have some sort of historical frame work for the audience to understand it. World building for fiction is incredibly similar as you must treat it like the historical framework for the game in question.

## Chapter 2: Ludology vs. Narratology

When first sitting down with a video game, an important question I ask myself, is “Do I need to know anything prior to diving into this experience?”. It is not uncommon in today’s reem of nostalgia, that reboots, sequels, prequels, and pre-sequels are constantly being released. On occasion, a new IP or new series comes out, but the big ones that garner hype and usually are more polished and complete of a game. Because of this environment, new ideas shine through, when a new IP does well, it brings hope to a stale system. It is tiring to try to figure out what is happening in a game if you have not invested the time in playing previous games in the series. Narratology in the world of video games, along with Ludology, carry strong arms in determining if a game is successful or not.

Narratology, while not just dedicated to video games, is impactful when discussing the success of a video game. A game like *Persona 5* (P-Studio, 2017) or *God of War* (SIE Santa Monica Studio, 2018) did well because their story was enough to bring in new players, along with tight mechanics and playability. You did not need to have previous experience in the titles to enjoy them. Games such as *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware, 2012), or *Destiny 2* (Bungie, 2017), require some previous knowledge of the worlds to fully enjoy. To dive in with these titles would likely confuse and drive users away even if the game play is tight, simply because the story is complex enough. There is no summary that really ties up what happens in the previous titles to lead into the new ones without feeling cheesy, or even alienating their old player base. This is the tricky part of coming up with a new IP. Some of the most successful games carry their reputation from other titles. *Pokemon Go* (Niantic, 2016), a title that seemed to stop time a few years ago, was not only carried by its rampant popularity, but also the fact that of all the players who took part in that, 75.2% of them had previous experience with the *Pokemon* franchise (Serrano, 2017).

A game that successful was partially brought to the forefront of mainstream culture because people had previous experience with the franchise. Other games, such as *Destiny 2* (Bungie, 2017) tried to bring in new players, but failed rather miserably, losing a great deal of its dedicated fanbase in the process. Games live and die by the stories they tell, whether that is in game, or the tales told between gamers of cool things they might have done. It's why a lot of IPs flop, or don't do as well as franchises. It's why in order to build a game from scratch, from a new world, a new idea, you have to start with a story and a theme that is relatable and impactful to the player. One they will remember years from now, when the sequel releases, that they will want to play repeatedly. The ground work is as important as the story itself.

Narrative isn't the only thing that identifies a strong game though. Ludology is important to understand simply because if it is just a story, it is just a book. The study of Ludology has a lot to do with the study of gameplay mechanics. It deals with how the player interacts with the world and how good mechanics in a game can lead to a vastly different experience than if things were changed. The gameplay is what sets most Indie games apart from many AAA (High development budgets and levels of promotion) titles, and even makes new IPs significantly more interesting. A game like *Banner Saga* (Stoic Studio, 2014) does have a great story, but the gameplay itself is intuitive and a challenge. The term "easy to learn, difficult to master" is one that lends itself to video games very well. The idea is to make a game that anyone can pick up with intuitive and forgiving controls, but one that takes time to really get the nuances of the gameplay. Studying gameplay can help identify what kinds of play styles speak to the player. Knowing that if the controls feel too tight or too floaty, they can change the players perception of a game. In recent times, the remaster of the *Crash Bandicoot* (Vicarious Visions, 2017) series changed the way the game played in slight ways, providing a different experience to what the

fans were originally familiar with. The new game's character model was a pill shape, rather than a cube when it came to collision detection, which meant that the player could slide off the stage on a seemingly safe jump. This change unnecessarily, and maybe unwittingly made the game more difficult and alienated potential players. Understanding this shift is important in making games so you don't repeat the same mistakes. It is unlikely that from this point on that when making a platformer, even a 3D one, that the game's creators will change the model shape as drastically to artificially create difficulty.

While there is a misconception on the approaches of Ludology, and Narratology, and that they are incompatible with each other, there is no reason that they cannot both be used to approach the development of a game. In fact, the person who popularized the term "Ludology" Gonzalo Frasca, wrote a piece titled *Ludologists love stories too: notes from a debate that never took place*. Frasca talks about how the arguments between the two do not seem to carry any weight (Frasca, 2003). That Ludologists were perceived to have no interest in the story or narrative that the player can interact with, but that no line was ever drawn and shown to that conclusion. Rather simply the thought that they did not label themselves as narratologists in their own pieces, that they did not believe in the narrative, going as far as saying "Several academic misunderstandings can be caused by not clearly specifying the definitions that scholars subscribe to" (Frasca, 6). Trying to debate the differences between the two is futile, and to build better games for tomorrow one should understand where both Ludologists and Narratologists come from and how they would pick your piece apart. The two groups' understanding of video games would further push the developer to construct more inspiring, and more influential games. Janet H. Murry notes that "Those interested in both games and stories see game elements in stories and story elements in games: interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely



subsumes the other” (Murry, 2005, p4). The gameplay itself impacts the narrative and the narrative should explain something within the gameplay. If *Destiny* (Bungie, 2014) did not explain the para-causality of light, and the power it holds, then the action of activating a “super” ability, something that can drastically change the outcome of a session, would have no precedence in that world. It would seem out of context and random.

*Song Bird* would need a healthy dose of narrative and gameplay to make the world feel real. The gameplay would need to feel floaty (but not obnoxiously) and the cloak that Val receives would have to feel like it fits within the world and makes gameplay fun. The gliding nature and quick pointed strikes of the main character would carry the idea of a bird and the themes they carry in a narrative. There is no argument that one overpowers the other, and there is not a reason that when building a game, you should put precedence in one over the other. Games with pure abstract nature such as Tetris (Pajitnov, Alexi, 1984) carry their own narratives and stories along with them that the player creates. *Song Bird* would need to stand apart though. As mentioned above, *Destiny* has unique gameplay, but the narrative isn’t just what the developers have laid in front of them. While a Narratologist might just look at the nonsensical, sporadic, and short story that the game offers, and a Ludologist, in the sense that they were originally perceived, might only see a game with really tight mechanics and fun game play, the game was fun and memorable for so many people simply because of what narratives we created as gamers. A game should not only make the player want to play more, but to be able to look back and say, “I cannot believe that happened”. Both the narrative and gameplay can make the player say that so why put more influence in one over the other. Ludology and Narratology in the end are arguing for the same thing, and when it comes down to it, both have the right idea for making a good game.

### **Chapter 3: Song Bird, the Narrative, and How I Got Here**

The heart of the project always was the story to be told. Level development and character design are nothing without the narrative to back it up. The story of Song Bird is one that most should be able to relate to. Discovering something that needs to be prevented, just before it's too late. To stop the issue, the tasks seem impossible, but someone devoted and brave enough could change the outcome for the better. To go with the gender-neutral character, the story should be interesting, but still let people feel like they can relate to the uphill struggle, and the near improbability of the task at hand, but the inevitable success of the hero. The story would follow Joseph Campbell's "Monomyth" relatively closely, taking its own twist on who plays what rolls.

#### **The Plot**

The world is on the brink of destruction, but no one is aware. What once were revered as deities are now hunted as trophies, a sign of humanities mastery over nature. With the Cloud Sea below, floating islands are the realm of mortals. Humans lived on the islands, secluded but safe for an eon. One island, under the guidance of Hizz-Ue, the god of wisdom, discovered steam-power, allowing for the movement between the islands, and the meetings of many peoples. Technology only improved after that, and humanity flourished. Great cities were erected on continent sized islands and the deities and their influence were pushed aside. In the most recent centuries, worship of the deities is all but outlawed and frowned upon. Some of the more bloodthirsty among the upper echelon have even been desiring the heads of the great beasts they once praised.

That was years ago. Nowadays, the Cloud Sea is dark and brooding, and all but a handful of the deities remain. Val, a member of the Sixth God-Hunter Battalion known as the "Aerialists", is a veteran god slayer. They had been a part of the first hunts and is currently a

member of a fleet trying to claim the life of one of the strongest deities, Hizz-Ue, a great owl-like beast with strength previously unassailable. The commander however has some unveiled weapon that he claims will change the tide of the battle. During the ensuing battle, Val is thrown from his ship into the heart of Hizz-Ue's Island, and the mystery weapon destroyed before it is activated. Val fumbles around in the Sanctuary island, encountering strange altered beasts, fighting or persuading them in order to pass. They wind up trouncing through temple atop the island, a small broken village, and the ruins of some forgotten shrine to wind up in front of a wall decorated with carvings long since forgotten by humans. The wall depicts the story of the deities fighting on the world below against some nameless horror simply known as the deep ones. The only solution they had at the time was to seal them in unending fog, now referred to as the Cloud Sea. Yet the gods use their power to maintain the barrier, and the conclusion is made by Val that if the gods are all slain, the Cloud Sea will fade, and the deep ones released. It is here that Val also dons the mantle of the Song Bird, an agent of Hizz-Ue, giving him a cloak that allows him limited flight, an important game mechanic, and two swords made in an ancient style. This is where the level ends, but the remainder of the game commences, as continued in Appendix C.

The story follows a very normal cadence: learning a truth, attempt to inform, learning something further, betrayal, near death, learning a plan, ending with an attempt to stop it. The game would end with the death of all or one of the primary characters: Val, Hizz-Ue, or The General. The multiple endings draw from the desire for the character to make as much of an impact on the story as they can, to choose to sacrifice themselves to solve the problem, or rise up as a deity themselves, killing the other two and claiming their power. The player would define how this story plays out, and how the world alters for better or worse based on decisions they had made earlier on in the game. As example, an encounter in the Village of the Sanctuary map

is of a group of aggressive guardsmen who try to stop Val from progressing. But if the player sneaks past them, the later show up, fighting for Hizz-Ue, increasing his likelihood of survival. If the player talks them down, a very difficult feat, not only do they join Hizz-Ue, they also gift you with a seal of their order, allowing you passage past the rest of the encounters in the level, and when you meet the god of secrets later on in the game, you immediately have his trust, a big shortcut making the game dynamic, and each playthrough slightly different. The path stays the same, the outcomes and how things go change.

The player having the choice to alter the ending plays up the concept of a gender-neutral character. With more control, the player would feel more invested in the motions of completing quests in their fashion and affecting the world of Song Bird in a way they feel most fitting. One of the big arguments against choice in game, is that the multitude of options can overwhelm the player. The gaming world is rife with titles that over use and over complicate, leaving to many choices with little explanation, sometimes leaving the player confused or unsatisfied unless they spend hours upon hours learning the systems complexities. Game such as Dishonored (Arkane Studios, 2011) however show how choices can drastically alter the pace and feel of the game without overwhelming the player. It is this kind of decision making that Song Bird would take on. It masks the choices, making it seem like the one you are taking is the only one. Only upon playing the games multiple times do the choices become apparent to you. This type of game play makes the story feel rewarding the first time or the tenth time through the levels. With more choices available, but only the one the player is actively taking available, it feels more like the player is living the world and affect it in the way they see fit.

### **Deciding on a Game Engine**

The narrative came to be out of my own need to feel free. When I had heard that we could do a creative project, I knew that a video game would be my topic. For the past few years however, the symbol of the bird has been one of the most influencing factors in my decision making. I had spent some time during the Fall 2016 semester in Digital Productions 1 working with the Unity gaming engine, wanting to learn more about the video game production process and how I could get from a hobbyist with lofty ambitions and dreams of creating video games from scratch, to actually programming them. I quickly learned the mountain I was about to scale as even Unity, an engine heralded as one of the easier platforms to master, took a significantly longer time to learn than any of the Adobe software. It wasn't until I started talking to my advisor about level design and gaming engines the following semester that the ideas of this world began to take shape. I would just need to find the right engine for it to live in.

Unity would not work for this. The engine is easy to use, but archaic. There are things that I had planned, images of sky islands and great caverns that would have been a monster to build inside of Unity. I had spent a semester with Dr. Lee looking over different game engines available, looking at newer ones like Amazon's Lumberyard, and even still considering Unity. I landed on Unreal 4 simply because of the power of the engine, and I knew it could easily handle what was spinning in my mind. That, and Unreal 4 had a different approach to programming, called Blueprints, which are lines of code, but envisioned as a pre-built road map for the commands, but needing to be assembled by the user. While seemingly difficult to wrap one's mind around at the start, it is far easier than learning individual code and the language it carries, and as a visual learner, it simply made more sense to me.

## The Groundwork

With the engine decided upon, I moved to more pressing issues. The groundwork. The story began with a simple premise, that humanity would ruin itself if it stayed on its current course, and the main character had to seem like they had free reign to make a choice, but still be tied by destiny. The first part, I slowly drew back. I was not in the business of being upfront and in your face about political statements, and I did not feel an academic pursuit was the right place to address them. But the character and the world were a different story. The world itself presented itself to me as many other story ideas had in the past. As an iota of a

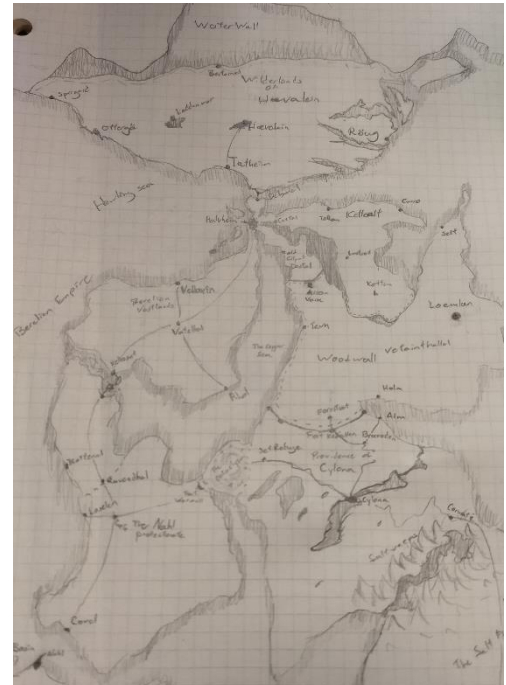


Figure 5 Example of one of my Campaign map early concepts.

concept, born by a map in my mind. Maps in fantasy worlds define culture, life styles, and people in general. Any time I create a new world for a book, a *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax, 1974) campaign or simply a small idea in my mind, I start with a map (fig. 5). As someone enamored with travel, seeing the by-ways, roads and river ways, life falls into place. *Song Bird* is unique in that I wanted to stretch out of my comfort zone. Instead of having a few continents here in there separated by ocean, I really wanted to push the sci-fi, high fantasy of the world, and placed it in the sky. Drawing from works such as Owl Boy (D-Pad studios, 2016) and The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword (Nintendo EAD, 2011). I figured out ways that the world is plausible, and how to best place the people. Once you understand the basic concept of the world you are living in, the rest of the pieces fall easily into place.

To have a character, who uses the magic of deities who inhabit this place and uses the technology of humanity to travel from island to island, all I needed was a face. The idea of the bird and all the iconography it bears would impact the character design and the base mechanics of the game. The character I knew had to be slightly taller, and lanky. The character in all of their states should look a little bird like, from the more obvious moments like when they are wearing the mask and cloak, to whatever their hair looked like, becoming a plumage of sorts, a crest. I mulled over what gender to make them, and how to best incorporate them, but after prolonged conversations with friends, professors, and some papers that I had written at the time, I knew that I had to make the character gender neutral. The player would not know what they were playing as simply to include as many people as I could in the world and experience I had built.

The fun part of this project was trying to convert an idea in my mind to a digital format. Sketches and maps can only go so far. Typed pages filled with names and histories can only portray so much, so to go from that, to the engine I had chosen, carried its own issues. An artist understands to never trust the imagine in their mind, as there is no way you will be satisfied with what comes out on the page. I built the world to be able to explain my own short comings, along with the game engine, making it clear that the map doesn't simply end, the island does. Of course, when I chose Unreal 4, I did not know the world of trouble it would bring, forcing me to adapt the story and the level in a way that made sense.

## Chapter 4: A World of Problems

The biggest hurdle for this project was definitely simply learning the software. Unreal 4 is a very powerful gaming engine, and with it comes with a quite complex set of tools to build video games with. It is much more intuitive of a platform than Unity, another gaming engine I had learned in the past. Yet much with any complex building tool, there were countless hiccups, both out of my own learning, and the capabilities of the software that I had to contend with. In the end, most of those issues were overcome, but most of my challenges were also some of my best learning moments.

Learning the software was an uphill battle. The learning curve made Photoshop look like Word. There are so many options and so many modes of placement, that as a first timer, it was very intimidating. The programmers at Epic Games did make tutorials for the new user, but there is nothing really to get you from placing blocks, to running a game. I personally think that Unreal 4 is a more user-friendly Unity, but it still struggles in helping its programmers jump the gap from beginner just trudging around to a person who can package and send off a reasonable and playable build. Other than the additional pain-points though, the battle was not impossible. I did what I could, connecting the tutorials to just simply messing around and breaking the game. I had multiple saves running across multiple devices, and more than once, I had to delete and reset hours of work because of some unforeseen bug. But again, while annoying and frustrating, not something that would make me give up. Whenever I had to redo something I had already done, it only made it easier to manipulate the tools and take a slightly different approach. For example, one reset I had lost a lot of sculpting work I had done on the ramp connecting the middle and top floors of the level. Little did I know at the time; the ramp was far too steep for the character to climb. What started with one square for the transition, looking somewhat fine on the preview,



ended up needing about 5 tiles to allow for the player to climb the ramp and ascend without being tossed back down to the bottom. A crash taught me about what level differences the player character could move without being hampered by elevation. Other than a few crashes though, some of my issues were more long running and far more detrimental. Sometimes, they even halted work altogether until I had spent hours trying to iron them out.

The first issue I had was with assets. When I started working in Unreal 4, the biggest drawback I could see was the lack of free asserts. The engine came with the models for a rock, bush, statue, and modern tables and chairs (fig.6). Not much for building a fantasy world. But I learned how to manipulate the simple geometry tools to build what I needed. This included the boat, the temple and most of the frame

work of the island including the exterior. I quickly figured out how I could manipulate the tools to get as close as I could to what I wanted. It was also around this time that I really ramped up the size



Figure 6 Unreal 4 Interface and default assets

of the map from about 7x7 tiles, to 70x70 or something comparable the level would take much longer to fill out but would much better achieve what I had originally envisioned for the project. It wasn't until much later that I had access to full assets, but this did allow me to flex my creative muscles, trying to show what I had envisioned with a limited arsenal.

My second major issue came by the name of memory limitations. I was running into a problem where trying to export the file, multiple errors occurred, stopping a 4-hour packaging session and wasting a lot of time. The major issue came when Epic Games, the company behind

the Unreal 4 engines released about 20 GB of free assets. This was a gold mine for me. I finally was able to better visualize what the final project would look like. I was able to add small details and more varied vegetation. I also learned the joys of foliage actors, a great way to put down grass, trees, and rocks all under one object. An unforeseen fate of this though is that the complexity of the assets was too much for even my system sometimes. I had to figure out a way to have all the details I wanted, but not make the game run horribly. I learned of a way to stream the levels or loading and unloading each section of the level in when you pass a certain point. This made a few places where the game would slow down as it loaded the next area, but during the important parts, the game runs extremely well as there is only 1/3 of the information being rendered at one time. The other issue that came with the assets was file name length. It's a weird problem to have, but aside from deleting the problematic files, there was not really a work around. Changing the file paths would cause even more issue, with tracking and referencing so I simply removed them, and after that, the game exported and packaged like a charm.

The third pain point was getting the third person and the model to work. It was a long running issue, as I had tried almost out of the gate, importing a character from Adobe Fuse, through Mixamo for animations, into Unreal 4. Unbeknownst to me, there was no support for the file type across those platforms with 3D models. I had attempted multiple times, making sure to try separate file types, collections and direct imports to try to get the model to look correct. Every time however, the character looked semi-transparent, and none of the animations copied over. I attempted importing the files into Maya, UV skins, animation and all and they worked on that platform, but when moved from Maya to Unreal, the same issues arose. Sadly, this meant that I could not get my own personal characters into the game. Which leads into the second part of this pain point, the actual mode of getting third person to work in the game. Unreal 4 is nice in

that it comes with prebuilt blueprints for different types of games such as a third person or first-person perspective, and platform games. The big issue is that once you set the blueprints, there is not a necessarily easy way of altering it. Even copying every little detail from the third person example Unreal 4 offered into my game file, which had started as a blank game format with a free cam for game play, and it still did not want to work. I had watch about 6 hours of YouTube tutorials made for people with hundreds of hours of Unreal 4 already under their belt. In the process, I found one button under one menu that did not have wording that made it seem like that's what it would do, which connected the players keyboard and mouse to the third person blueprints. An easy alteration, but for someone learning the engine, it was just a little annoying. In the end it worked out, I got the third person base animations and model into the game, making it possible to run around and really experience the world, just not in the character model I had initially wanted.

There is no easy way of learning software as complicated as a gaming engine without quite a few issues. Even with an active teacher, accidentally checking the wrong box can make the game completely unplayable. Without a guide, the process was much more tedious, looking across forums and YouTube videos simply to solve a problem that doesn't seem like should be too difficult. In the end, this project and all the issues that came with it gave me a greater appreciation for those who do actively work in game engine software and made me realize, I would be happy only doing world building and leaving the programming to the programmers. It was a humbling experience and a good one none the less. I would most certainly do it again.

## **Chapter 5: The World of Dichotomous Gaming: The Gender-Neutral Character**

The world of gaming takes on a peculiar form when it comes to political environment. Much like any other form of art, small decisions can have massive ratification for the game in terms of how it seen and received. While the strong female protagonist is extremely important in giving women a chance to be portrayed in a video game in a positive light, not necessarily just a sex symbol or object, it is important to remember two other things: one; anti-Social Justice Warriors do exist and are rampant on the internet, and two; gender nowadays is seen more as a spectrum than a toggle switch. On the first topic, after doing research on how a strong female protagonist effects the reviews of a game, I found that it doesn't do much, but it can rob people the experience of a great game. Titles like *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerilla, 2017) and *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) are heralded as the greatest games of their time, yet there are some out there who are adamant against playing it, simply because the game forces you to play as a woman. Those individuals claim it is liberal agenda stuffing their beliefs down their throats, not just an artistic choice. Even a popular game, such as *Battlefield V* (EA Dice, Unreleased) cannot get away from this anti-SJW world. The cover for their new game was released, portraying a woman fighting in WWII rather than the typical man in army garbs. Twitter, Tumblr and Reddit (especially Reddit) have been a mess with people complaining about how it is just socialist agenda, disregarding the historical evidence that women did fight in WWII. The backlash to the cover alone has so many Anti-SJW individuals boycotting the game. But how that leads to the second option is interesting. After prolonged friendships with transgendered people, even with strong female protagonists, or even both genders being equally portrayed, not everyone feels like they can connect with characters. Games like *Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) in which characters are fully customizable doesn't go far enough. It is misleading and telling of the current environment

in which gaming takes place, that the gender UI of these games is on a slider, but it only clicks to male or female. No in-between. There is no easy solution to this issue, but in my project, I think I have found a way to reach the most amount of people possible, while not alienating those who disagree with my personal beliefs. I will create a gender-neutral character.

Gender-Neutral characters have been done before and are slowly getting more and more achievable. While some games gain strength from their protagonist being a set gender, as in the case of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerilla, 2017) when the realism and the character development are the strong points of the game. But in a game where the player choices are what drive the plot, the player needs to feel as if they can relate to the figure they are playing as. Games such as *Undertale* (Fox, 2015) do this so flawlessly, that it seems like it's the opposite problem. Anyone can see the main character, an ambiguous blob of pixels, vaguely shaped as a human. By being given the option to name the character, the player is the defining factor as to whether the character is male or female or anywhere in-between. The issue is the resolution. *Undertale* (Fox, 2015) is a "Pixel-art" style of video game, meaning, while it is pretty in its own way, you can't tell much about the character's details and takes some relatability out of the game. Games with high detail graphics, such as *Warframe* (Digital Extremes, 2013) take a completely different approach to gender neutral characters, even including a character creation system. The game lets you pick two faces, and while some lean more toward male and others female, the flexibility means that you can more accurately create a character you can see yourself in (Figure 7). On top of that, it gives you a relatively petit, uniform body that is difficult to discern gender. Where the game falls short with gender neutral, is with voice. They give you four options, all very distinctly male and



Figure 7

female. Other than that, the list of other non-binary characters is very short, meaning we don't have a lot to go on when it comes to successfully designing a gender non-binary character. Some ideas can be as easy as making all hairstyles available for all characters. In games where you create the character from the ground up, few make it so that a male character model and have female hairstyles. After conversations with some non-gender binary people, this seems like an easy solution for those games that, for time constraint, have only programmed in the two base models. Games such as *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) allow this, and it seems an easy fix for creating gender neutrally (I say as someone who has not spent time a lot of time creating character models). Yes, you would have some warping issues with the meshes most likely (male heads being seen as slightly bigger in the video game world), but most hairstyles are developed for multiple head sizes in some of these bigger games.

## **Design**

Moving onto how I had designed a gender-neutral character, I stayed away from gender identifiers (i.e. torso size, waist size, styled hair and facial hair). This is harder said than done, as every change of bone structure can make an individual change their perception of the character. While saying "men have broad jaws" or "women have smaller foreheads" are easy to change, things such as arm size and height can be a little more challenging. The best way to identify these smaller things is first to build two other models, a male and a female, as the audience would see as the typical model of the two. Finding the halfway point between the two models may provide a better understanding of how to design the character. The other way is to cheat the eye. Cover up the model in clothes and a mask. While it may seem kind of weird, people can still identify gender characteristics in body movement, and what little they can see under the garb. I

had originally started with the second option. Trying to mask the character ended up removing all chance for the player to identify with the character. All my early concepts of the character covered everything up, but really left out any identifiers someone could relate to. I had unintentionally secluded everyone rather than include them. So, after some discussions with people, I set off to design a character that you could cover pieces of the character and see a different gender.

## **Base**

Coming up with the baseline for this work was rather difficult. This in some way was where I could show off my skills and experiences as an artist to be able to build a gender-neutral character. As mentioned above, I stayed away from gender identifiers, but it is a little more complicated than that. I could give the person a straight torso, but even that codes more masculine. The major dilemma of creating a gender-neutral character, is that we live in a society where gender-neutral is rather unheard of. Even people who code as gender-neutral still tend to look more masculine or feminine. In this case however, I stuck to a slimmer build. It fits with the character, and it is believable either way. There is also more muscle mass on the character, and shoulders that could be broad, but not too broad to be overtly masculine. The facial structure was specifically meant to look a little more feminine given the body tending to lean more masculine. Rather than trying to build a character devoid of gender identifiers, rather, there are conflicting characteristics, ones that could be taken one way or another, but not so heavy weighted to one side.

The hair was simple. Short hair is a common line between both male and female. The argument can be made for either gender and the way that it falls could lend itself to be masculine or feminine. The red was simply chosen as a stylistic take on the character. It takes the player

away from standard identifiers that plague the video gaming world such as the “grizzled, bearded, dark brown-haired” character in a lot of adventure games.

### **Voice and Name**

Some of the other aspects of the character, such as name, voice, and interactions will also impact the “gender neutral” nature of the game. The name was chosen as a potential shortening of multiple names, such as Valarie. Val itself is an ambiguous enough name that it could be either gender. Like the looks of the main character, originally when coming up with an idea for the voice, I wanted to mask it, doing the old school style of voices of gibberish and using a balanced pitch to hide any gender. As with the looks however, it felt like it would also make it so that no one could relate to the character. Instead of that, and instead of making the character silent (a trope commonly played upon in video games) I decided an alto female voice would work best. The mix of female timbre with male range would muddy the distinctions of the differences in masculine and feminine. Accents would do little to mask the voice simply because we are so used to hearing so many different inflections from person to person. Of course, in such a short time to develop this game, I could not find the right voice to record voice acting. I would have loved to, but everyone I thought maybe could pull it off, just didn’t quite fit the right pitch when they were recorded. The voice is something else left on the blocks, to be picked up later.

The last piece of solidifying the character as a gender-neutral figure, is their interaction with other NPCs within the world. I would place gender in the universe as practically even. There would be no matriarchy or patriarchy, just to make the character believable regardless of who the player thinks they are. There would be no romance or anything of the sort, this is not a true RPG. Without any cultural or romantic means to identify the character, there would be no decided way to identify the character. The nature of the story lends itself to this, and likely, I



would not have a voice over of the character speaking to the player. Games such as *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005) pulled off the silent protagonist very well, but I would add in conversation where it was necessary. The player throughout the story is mostly alone, but during the moments of interaction, the character would shine through. This gives the player the chance to further invest in the character and see themselves in their shoes, but still draw out believability and character from Val.

**Conclusion: Where to Go from Here**

To say that this was a humbling experience is underselling it. I live for world building but tapping into the world of video game design has given me a deeper admiration for those who do this daily, and to a greater degree than I had. The character design and world building alone was enough for me, but the actual video game gave me deeper insights into what it would mean to be a video game designer. The best story teller knows every moving piece of their medium. Not necessarily to master them, but to know the limitations, and the freedoms one can take when designing a story. If I were to have the idea for a level that could not feasibly be built, I now truly understand why. It is a beast to build a video game from the ground up, and even harder to take what I have going on in my head and translate it to a digital format. I can tell you with complete certainty, that Val, and the Sanctuary itself, looked very different in my mind when I was just brainstorming it walking home from class.

I have been asked on multiple occasions, “Why this project?” I had asked myself that multiple times as I was fighting through figuring out some minute tool of the Unreal 4 engine. But the answer, boiled down, comes down to; “Because I love games, and I love a good story”. I was finally able to mix two of my greatest loves in my life, video games and writing, and work to a singular unifying cause. To be honest, I have no idea if the *Song Bird* project will live past this project. It might be stored deep in my mind, always there, but simply a memory and an old file on my computer, or it may take on a life on its own. I started this project with the mindset it would stand as a portfolio of sorts. A way to showcase my skills in learning new software, a knowledge of game design and level progression, and of world building. In the end, it amounted to about what I expected. A playable game, but still more high concept. The world is relatively flushed out and the characters built, but it would still be unclear as to how well it would relate to

a video game. The controls and gameplay were not implemented due to my own skills lacking, but the game as it stands does not need it. In the end, I am not a software engineer. I am a story teller. The level design itself, the characters and the world behind it is more important for me. I sculpted the game to my needs and feel satisfied in my work, believing it to be a good capstone for my abilities and skills I had learned as a Graduate student. While it would have been easier to simply write a thesis on Gender Neutral Characters in Gaming or The Divide Between Storytelling and the Game, designing a world and building it best defines me as a creator. I have already written the papers, and I wanted to challenge myself and further improve my chances in starting a career in video game design. As a designer and a world builder, this was the only project I could have done and have been happy with.

**Appendix A: The Artwork of *Song Bird***



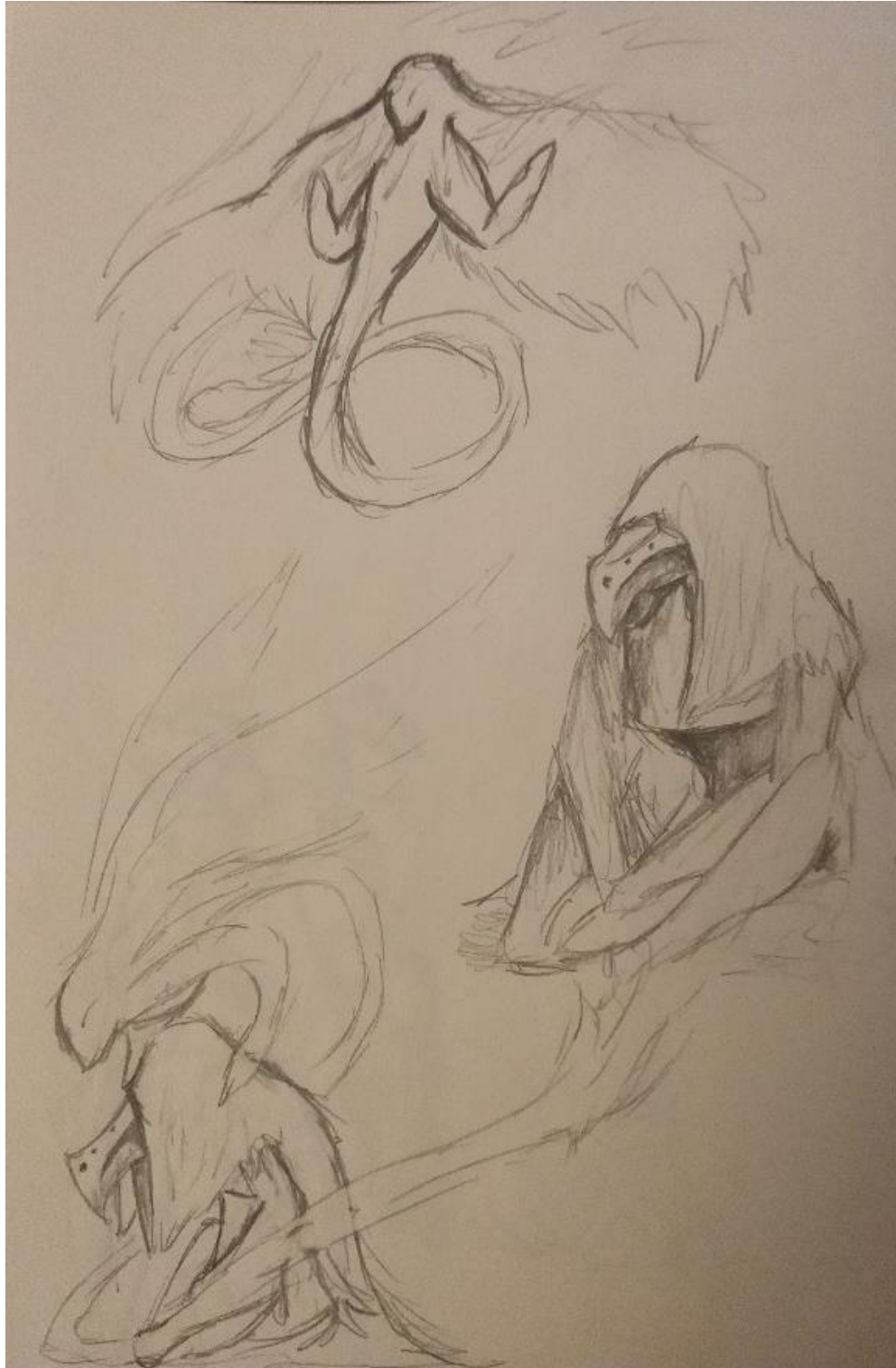
*Val Sketch*



Val Song Bird Sketches



Hizz-Ue Sketch



*Figure 4 Yol-Geen and the Remnant of Pit-Itel Sketch*





*Figure 5 Issun Sketch*





Figure 6 Gildren Sketch









Figure 7 Val Digital Render

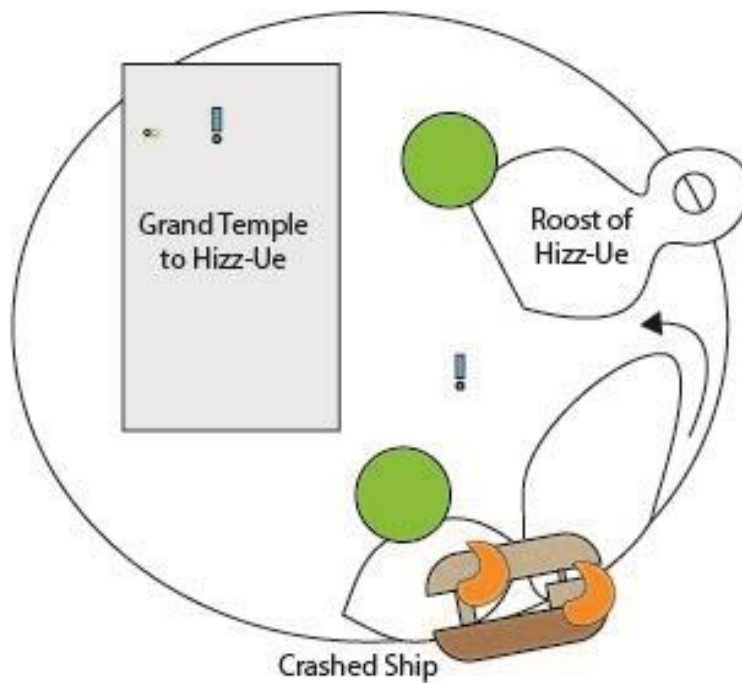


Figure 8 Val 3D Model Render

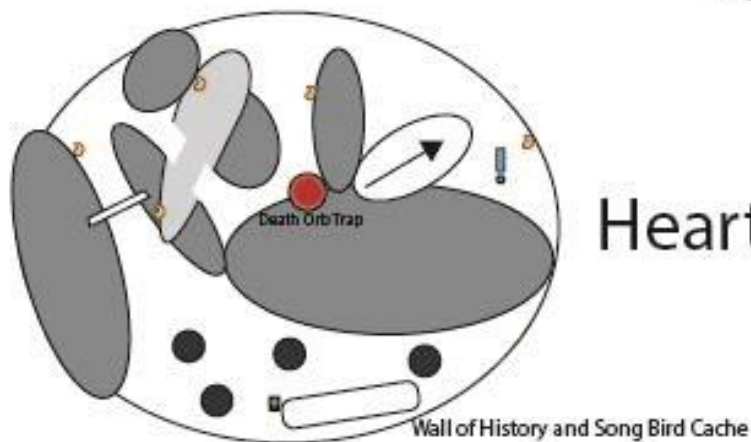
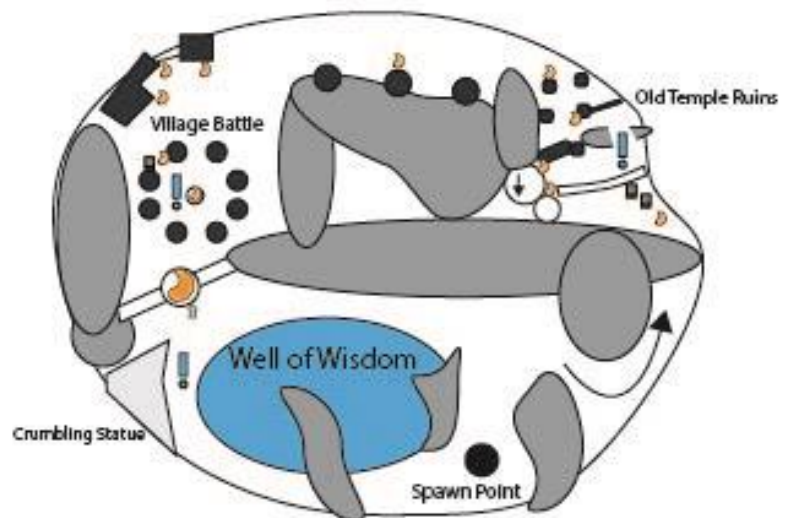
# Song Bird - Sanctuary Map

Legend -

-  - Fire (intentional path)
-  - Hidden Chest
-  - Trap
-  - Encounter
-  - Lock
-  - Key



## The Reccess



**Appendix B: Manuscript for the First Level – The Sanctuary**

1                      FADE IN - SHIPS HOLD - DAY                      1

A SOLDIER clad in an aviator-like suit, a leather head cap and goggles sits on the edge of a hammock, hung between two support poles. The dark wood about them shines from the light of oil lanterns hanging on the wall. Copper pipes run all throughout the cambers, and occasionally steam spews forth in a soft hissing noise.

The SOLDIER scratches their head, then lifts two brass swords from off the floor. Static electricity jumps from them as SOLDIER stands up.

A loud BANG as the door to the chamber swings open violently. ANOTHER SOLDIER, more rotund, but well built, enters.

                         ANOTHER SOLDIER  
Oi! VAL! Wake up in there! We're  
getting close to the temple!

Silence, The SOLDIER (VAL) is clearly lost in thought.

                         ANOTHER SOLDIER  
VAL! Hey! Get your head outta your  
ass! It's ISSUN! You know, your  
pal! Wake up!

ANOTHER SOLDIER (ISSUN) walks up and pushes VAL's shoulder.

                         VAL  
Wha-? Oh sorry. Must've drifted  
off. What's up?

VAL stands. They are visibly taller than ISSUN and better built.

                         ISSUN  
We're getting close to Hizz-Ue's  
temple. There's so much buzz in the  
air. Surprised it didn't shock you  
up.

ISSUN waits for VAL to respond. But VAL says nothing. VAL starts putting more equipment on. Belts with various pouches, shoulder pads, and other assorted equipment.

                         ISSUN  
Well... Ok then, I guess those are  
important too. Captain wanted you  
to be ready for launch. This guys  
supposed to be hella scary.

(CONTINUED)

**Appendix C: Song Bird Story Beat Sheet****-Act 1**

- Assault on Hizz-Ue's temple
- Val finds the wings and learns about the deities holding back those that lurk below.
- tries to return to the capital, but is branded as a deserter and a heretic.

**-Act 2**

-Lives a short time on the outer islands, until they learn one of the gods is nearby and is being targeted.

- When they find the god, they help defend it from the army
- Is thanked and given a blessing by the peaceful deity
- Hunts down the remaining soldiers in attempt to hide the gods location
- Finishes by killing his old captain just outside the capital's gate
- Takes the opportunity to sneak back into the city
- Stumbles upon the god of secrets and the remnants of the sun god's spirit
- With their guidance, Val finds their way into the grand palace, using hidden ways and stealth
- Approaches the Queen who all but ignores him, and makes very clear she doesn't care.

General arrives, revealing he is pulling the strings and it was his idea to hunt the deities to extinction.

- Val runs from the palace and through the capital, trying to escape
- Runs into Issun at the city gates, the two battle it out, but Issun is vanquished. Val carries his friends body from the capital and stows away on a military transport ship.

**-Act 3**

-The ship and the fleet accompanying it are hunting Hizz-Ue, they get a short distance when Hizz-Ue makes another preemptive attack.

-Val fights their way across the ships, flying from place to place, looking for the General.

-Hizz-Ue remembers Val and is not swayed by his change of heart.

-As Val reaches the general, Hizz-Ue perishes to a massive harpoon on the flagship

-As Hizz-Ue dies, shadowy portals open in the clouds below them releasing a torrent of horrors

-Chaos ensues as the fleet is quickly overrun. Val and the General fight, ending with the death of the General.

-Val questions why the barrier broke when gods remained.

-Val returns to the capital to find the secret god, but is met with an empty chamber. One of the sun god's followers tells Val of the death of the god of secrets by the army's hands, and the sun god's spirit escaping into the palace.

-Val goes back to the palace to find the Queen possessed by the sun god, she is surrounded by the army but does not fight back as they advance.

-Val jumps to protect the god, fighting back the soldiers that get too close

-A great beast rises from the shadows, a dark version of Hizz-Ue

-The soldiers retreat, but Val stands and fights, eventually slaying the beast with the help of the sun god.

-The sun god manages to bottle up the portals again, returning to some power

-Val receives another blessing, this time from the sun god, and becomes the guardian of the sun god.

**Appendex D: Song Bird Break Down –****Places:**

Ferralin – Capital of Humanity. A large verge steampunk fantasy city with high flying buildings. Built atop a building going all the way down to the Broiling Sea.

Temple at Hecanth – Home of Hizz-Ue, it is place of ancient reverence for the gods of the sky pantheon. Protected by winged Harriers that still hold true to the old ways.

Mersau – Home of Val, who returns after finding the winged cloak. Protected by

Tyi-Guun, the renegade god who turns on Val.

**Characters:**

Val – The Song Bird. Begins as a member of the Sixth God-Hunter Battalion, the “Aerialists”. After Hizz-Ue horribly defeats the battalion, they find the wing cloak and stumble upon the truth that killing the spirits will cause the “Deep Ones” to rise, a far greater evil that humanity cannot stand against.

Issun – Friend of Val. With them in the “Aerialists” battalion. Gets away from the massacre brought on by Hizz-Ue and ends up being a boss Val has to defeat to get to the Queen.



Hizz-Ue – God of Calamity and Cunning. A powerful spirit that rains havoc on the “Aerialists”, causing one of the most unanimous defeats in humanities recorded history.

Gildrin – General of the God-Hunters, captain of the great frigate *The Insurrection*. The final boss of the game, to be fought alongside Hizz-Ue. Not just evil to be evil, truly believes humanity killing their gods will ascend them to godhood.

Queen Odderein – A mere puppet of Gildrin. Kept in line by riches and safety.

Tyi-Guun – God of Wards and Hearth. Known as the renegade gods. After being deemed “unkillable” by Gildrin, Tyi-Guun turned on his own kind, protecting the humans of Mersau against the wrath of their brethren. Allowed to live, but Gildrin is actively looking for a way to kill him.

Yol-Geen – God of Hidden Ways. A god hidden deep in Ferralin. Overlooks one of the last Coven of the old ways, kept alive by constantly hiding. Is stumbled upon by Val after they try to escape from the palace, but turns on Val after learning who exactly they are.

Pit-Itel – God of Wrath and Ward of the Sun. Initially left as the final god to be slain. The top of the entire pantheon. Pit-Itel ends up being a push over and is second to Hizz-Ue. Killed just before Val can get there.

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